

25th April 2021
Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

Palm Sunday

Christ comes to Bethany again, after the raising of his friend Lazarus. Here, He is anointed in preparation for His burial, as our catechumens also will be anointed before they go down into the waters of baptism. He is going up to Jerusalem, to offer there his life as a sacrifice, expiating the sins of the world, and overcoming the final enemy, Death.

Through the Great Fast I have spoken to you about our Orthodox understanding of Christ's redeeming work, of the new passover, His going down into the mystery of death; death which came into the world through the sin of Adam; the mortality that is inherent in us all, and leads us, in turn, into sin. Yet we, in our individuality, did not ask to be born into this world, as they say. But therein lies a paradox: how could we be ourselves, the person we are, unless we are born into this world.

We were not guilty of bringing death into existence, but we still have the same nature as Adam, and have fallen into our own sins against God, and even now, we fall a thousand times a day. Yet, truth to tell, although we are responsible for our own unrepentant minds, and we are culpable for what we have said and done, we are also the victims of our sins that have taken such a hold upon us, like that demon of whom we read in the gospel on the fourth Sunday of Lent, who had taken such a hold of the deaf and dumb boy and sought to destroy him.

What a scandalous proclamation is the Cross of Christ! a free release for sinners! How affronted the devil must be! Satan, the Accuser, has a keen sense of justice. That was the point of the old Law: it set the bounds of righteousness in a fallen world for God's old people, Israel. As St Paul writes in Galatians, 'But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.' [Gal.3:23-25] We know that it was said of old, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' [Matt.5:38];

That sense of justice, of what is fair, is the first moral lessons that even little children quickly learn.

In this world every human society has understood our need for order and justice. Scratch even an anarchist, and underneath you find one who demands his rights if you wrong him, just like anyone else. Try to imagine a human society where there is no justice, no forces of Law and Order; one where anyone could walk away with your goods with impunity. Then would prevail the so-called law of the jungle, each taking revenge according to his own notions. But in reality, what would happen would be the rise of the strong, the powerful, the arrogant and the violent. That is why we surrender our personal right to justice to the rule of Law, where the state takes responsibility of investigation, arrest, prosecution, trial and punishment, and all done dispassionately for the common good.

This is the best we can hope for in this fallen world, where the Criminal Law has, at best, six purposes when it imposes punishment. Firstly, vindication of the victim and justifying the existence of the law in the first place: what's the point of a law if it were never imposed? Secondly, just retribution for the offence; reparation for the harm done; protection of society from the criminal; deterrence for those who might commit crime; and finally, reform of the offender. Any form of punishment that can do all that is a good form of justice and is the best we can expect in this world. That is what Paul is speaking about in his letter to the Romans: 'For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake.' [Rom.13:3-5]

But all this is temporary. God's righteousness is not like Man's justice, and here is Christ God Himself, coming to prove it this morning: 'Hosanna! Blessed is He Who cometh in the Name of the Lord, the King of Israel!' Yet what a king! One whose kingdom, as He will tell the governor, Pontius Pilate, is not of this world. [Jn.18:36]

Christ goes up to Jerusalem not to bring God's wrath upon sinners but to set free those whose lives are confined by death. On Holy Saturday, the Great Sabbath, we will celebrate the very Harrowing of Hell, when the dead of all ages will be called to new life. As I have told you before, there is something terribly wrong about those theories of atonement that see Our Lord paying for the moral debt of sin. For what is here is the abolishment of the consequences; what is here is the grace of God; what is here is Christ's vanquishing of Death.

The worldly mind may well be scandalised at the idea of someone getting away with something, as we say. Yet that is the gospel! that is the good news for those who repent in humility before the utter love of God. No wonder the devil is aghast, robbed of those whom he had kept captive! As it says in the Apocalypse, 'Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time.' [Apoc.12:12]

10] We may be tempted to look with loathing into the face of the psychopath, the abuser, the criminal, the addict, the sociopath, the fanatic, the corrupt. But they are only ourselves, magnified; they too were created in the image of God, though now held captive by Sin, the sting of Death. They too have only to believe and repent to start their recovery. But we are of those who have accepted this free gift of grace; we have been redeemed at no cost to us, but that is our new beginning and, from then on, the work begins: the ascetic struggle to be rid of the passions that cause us to sin and to restore in us the likeness of God.

11] The Lenten Fast has ended and once more we take up the cross of Christ; we have, even this day, taken hold of these signs, crosses of palm leaves, setting out to follow Him through this week. We even proclaim this in the funeral hymns of the Church, commemorating those who have fallen asleep in the Lord: 'Ye who have trodden the narrow way most sad; all ye who in life have taken upon you the Cross as a yoke, and have followed me through faith, draw near: Enjoy ye the honours and the crowns which I have prepared for you.'

12] Of course, there is still judgement to come, as we recalled on Meat-fare Sunday. Of course, as ever, there are those who will refuse the grace of God; those who imagine they can save themselves; those who refuse to believe that we need salvation at all; those who trust in the ways of this world; those who deny their own mortality; those too consumed by pride or sloth to seek the Lord. As Christ says to us towards the end of St Mark's gospel, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptised will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.' [Mk.16:15-16] The gospel of our redemption will always scandalise those who demand a final justice, like those in the parable who had laboured from the first hour and thought they deserved more than those who came at the eleventh.

13] Around the year 160AD, Bishop Melito of Sardis preached a homily on Pascha, bearing very early witness to this, almost shocking, generosity of God: 'When the Lord had clothed himself with humanity, and had suffered for the sake of the sufferer, and had been bound for the sake of the imprisoned, and had been judged for the sake of the condemned, and buried for the sake of the one who was buried, he rose up from the dead, and cried aloud with this voice: Who is he who contends with me? Let him stand in opposition to me. I set the condemned man free; I gave the dead man life; I raised up the one who had been entombed. Who is my opponent? I, he says, am the Christ. I am the one who destroyed death, and triumphed over the enemy, and trampled Hades under foot, and bound the strong one, and carried off man to the heights of heaven, I, he says, am the Christ....This is the one who sits at the right hand of the Father. He bears the Father and is borne by the Father, to whom be the glory and the power forever. Amen.'